DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BRIEFING PAPER

(167) R

December 4, 1980

MEMORANDUM

To: S/RTT - Mr. Perle

From: PA - William J. Dyess (S)

Subject: American Public Opinion on East-West Issues

At your request, we submit this overview of American public perceptions of East-West issues. It draws on analyses presented in briefing memoranda dating back to 1976, when our opinion analysts were reporting to Secretary Kissinger that Americans were dubious about detente.

For each issue treated herein, the memoranda containing the most current and complete data are referenced and attached.

Attachment:
As stated

cc(without tabs): S/S - Mr. Seitz
S/S - Mr. Bellamy

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR
REVIEWED BY [signature] DATE 5/6/85
RDS☐or XDS☐EXT. DATE _____
TS AUTH. _____ REASON(S) _____
ENDORSE EXISTING MARKINGS ☐
DECLASSIFIED☐ RELEASABLE☒
RELEASE DENIED☐
PA or FOI EXEMPTIONS _____

TABLE OF CONTENTS

American Public Opinion on East-West Issues

		Page No.
I.	Perceptions of Soviet Global Intentions	1
II.	Predominant Sentiment Regarding the Soviet Union	2
III.	Attitudes Toward:	
	-- U.S.-Soviet Military Capability	3
	-- Defense Spending	4
	-- U.S. Soviet Relations	5
	-- U.S. Soviet Negotiations	6
	-- Trade and Sanctions	7
	-- "Playing the China Card"	8
	-- Soviet Dissidents	9
	-- Arms Control and SALT	10

Perceptions of Soviet Global Intentions

During the period spanning the take-over of Embassy Tehran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the American public's view of Soviet global intentions soured dramatically. Roper polls show that from October, 1979, to February, 1980, the proportion of the American public who perceived the Soviet Union as seeking "global domination" rose from 55 percent to 73 percent. Among the 73 percent, more than half (39 percent of the total public) believed the Soviet Union would "risk a major war" to achieve global domination. This 39 percent figure was more than double the 18 percent who gave this answer to the same question four months earlier.

By last winter, therefore, Americans were viewing Soviet intentions about as dubiously as in 1950, when a Gallup poll found that 82 percent of the public believed the USSR sought to be "the ruling power of the world." (For details, see memo of April 11, 1980, at Tab 1.)

Roper has just released the findings from his October repetition of this question. They show that Americans' interpretation of what the Soviet Union is up to has softened--slightly--since February. Instead of 39 percent believing the Soviet Union would risk "a major war" to achieve global domination, that view is now held by 28 percent. Overall, two-thirds of the public now believes the Soviet Union seeks "global domination":

	October 1980	February 1980	October 1979
Russia seeks to protect itself	5%	5%	9%
Russia seeks to compete with the U.S.	21	18	30
Russia seeks global domination but won't risk major war	38	34	37
	)66%	)73%	)55%
Russia seeks global domination, and will risk major war	28	39	18
No opinion	8	4	6

Predominant Sentiment Regarding the Soviet Union

The events of late 1979-1980 virtually eliminated the "generation gap" that had characterized American attitudes toward the Soviet Union during the Seventies. As recently as 1979, there was a marked difference in the extent to which those over 50 and those under 50 viewed the Soviet Union favorably. By early 1980, this generational difference had almost disappeared. A Gallup poll taken in January, 1980, showed 13 percent of the entire public holding a "favorable opinion" of the Soviet Union, compared to 34 percent a year earlier. The high point recorded by Gallup was 45 percent in June, 1973, following the Brezhnev visit; the lows were 17 percent in 1966, 5 percent in 1956 and 1954, and 1 percent in 1953. (See memo of February 26, 1980, at Tab 2.)

Attitudes Toward U.S.-Soviet Military Capability

During the past four years, the public's perception of U.S. military capability vis-a-vis the Soviet Union has steadily darkened.

By July, 1980, a majority of the American public was perceiving the USSR as militarily stronger than the U.S. The proportion holding this view had more than doubled since December, 1976 (57 percent vs 27 percent). During the same period, the proportion seeing the U.S. as militarily stronger than the USSR had declined from 21 percent to 6 percent. (See memo of August 6, 1980, p. 1, at Tab 3.)

The poll questions cited above were worded in terms of "military" capability, and did not distinguish between nuclear military strength and conventional military strength. Roper polls taken at various times in 1980 show that a majority of Americans (51 percent) now believes the U.S. is behind the Soviet Union in conventional capability and a plurality of Americans (43 percent) now believes the U.S. is behind in nuclear military capability.

Conventional Capability (Feb. 1980)		Nuclear Capability (Sept./Oct. 1980)
51%	U.S. Behind	43%
29	U.S. About Even	29
10	U.S. Ahead	15
10	Don't Know	13
(memo of April 11, 1980 at Tab 1)		(newly released and reported data)

Concurrent with the widening public perception that the Soviet Union is growing militarily more powerful than the U.S. has been a growing public preference for attaining military superiority over the Soviet Union. CBS polls show that in June, 1979, the public was evenly divided between those who thought the U.S. should be militarily superior to the Soviet Union and those who thought it should be militarily equal. By August, 1980, a majority had come to prefer military superiority, and this majority increased sizably during September, 1980, after Iran and Iraq went to war:

Preferred U.S. Military Strength	Late September 1980	August 1980	June 1979
Superior to USSR	60%	51%	42%
About equal	32	42	45
Not as strong as USSR	4	2	7
No opinion	4	5	6

(See memo of October 6, 1980, attached at Tab 4.)

Attitudes Toward Defense Spending

The second half of the Seventies was a period of growing concern about Soviet military capability and, concurrently, a growing willingness to increase U.S. defense spending. By early 1980, the anti-defense-spending mood inspired by the Vietnam War had dissipated. The proportion of Americans who wished to see defense spending increased was at the highest level since 1950. This marked a complete reversal of the anti-defense-spending sentiment that reached its peak in 1969.

The extent of the shift can be gauged by comparing the proportion who responded "too little" was being spent on defense with the proportion responding "too much" in Roper polls asked between December, 1974, and December, 1979:

	Too Little	Right Amount	Too Much	Don't Know
December 1979	41%	35%	16%	9%
1977	23	40	24	13
1974	13	42	32	13

Essentially, there was a reversal of sentiment between December, 1974, and December, 1979. (See memo of February 11, 1980, at Tab 5.)

A comparable question asked by the National Opinion Research Center (University of Chicago) in 1980 shows a further increase in pro-spending sentiment:

	Too Little	Right Amount	Too Much	Don't Know
Spring, 1980	56%	26%	11%	7%

Attitudes Toward U.S.-Soviet Relations

Despite the negative perceptions and attitudes previously outlined, the American public has continued to accept the Soviet Union as a significant actor on the world stage with whom the U.S. should try to achieve some form of modus vivendi. The public has held to this view even as its concern regarding U.S. military capability intensified and its preference for higher defense spending increased.

The public's ability to distinguish between the countries it likes and the countries it considers important in terms of U.S. interests is illustrated in polls conducted by Potomac Associates in 1978 and again in 1979. Each time, respondents were asked: "When it comes to pursuing our interests all around the world, how important do you think it is for the U.S. to try to get along well with each of the following countries--very important, fairly important, not so important, or not important at all?"

Both polls listed 14 of the same countries. In both polls, the Soviet Union received the second-highest designation as "very important" for the U.S. to try to get along with.

	Percentage Answering "Very Important"	
	1979	1978
The Top Ranking Countries:		
Canada	76%	64%
Soviet Union	67	61
Mexico	67	--
Saudi Arabia	63	51
The Bottom Ranking Countries:		
India	33	23
North Korea	29	22

(Data for 1978 from memo of November 2, 1978, attached at Tab 6; data for 1979 newly released and reported.)

Even as the public was taking an increasingly dim view of the Soviet Union during the period 1979-80, the interest in seeking a mutual accommodation did not lessen. The Roper poll repeated a question that inquired about a list of "things...the government should be making a major effort on now...or something not needing any particular government effort now."

	June 1980 (June 1979 in parentheses)	
	Major Effort	No Effort
Trying to improve relations between the U.S. and Russia	47% (41)	11% (11)

(See memo of August 15, 1980, attached at Tab 7.)

Attitudes Toward U.S.-Soviet Negotiations

The American public is of two minds regarding the policies it prefers the U.S. to pursue vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Even as Americans clearly want a bigger "stick" visibly at hand, they want "carrots" available that also can be tendered. A Roper poll of February 1980, asked respondents which of three basic approaches in dealing with the USSR the U.S. should take "in light of Russia's invasion of Afghanistan."

A plurality (44 percent) favored a dual policy of attempting to improve relations through negotiations while deterring future Soviet expansionism through strong counter-action now. A smaller proportion (36 percent) believed the U.S. should rely primarily on increased military strength to deter the Soviets. A far smaller proportion (16 percent) favored a relatively accommodating approach to the USSR.

In most population groups, the dual approach had somewhat more supporters than the non-conciliatory approach. Among those groups with the highest levels of support for a non-conciliatory stance, there was an almost even division between those favoring the non-conciliatory approach and those favoring the dual approach. No more than 20 percent of any population group favored the accommodating approach. (See memo of July 11, 1980, at Tab 8.)

Attitudes Toward Trade and Sanctions

In 1978, even before the recent souring of public sentiments toward the Soviet Union, selling it products that embodied advanced technology was opposed by almost two-thirds of the public (63 percent). Only 12 percent favored such sales and another 19 percent wanted to distinguish among various products.

Poll findings of several years ago on other kinds of trade are less clear-cut. But, it appears that a majority favored such trade at then-current levels. (See memo of June 23, 1978, at Tab 9.)

By February, 1980, a majority (62 percent) favored restricting U.S.-Soviet trade in general and some 80 percent of the public favored the newly imposed embargoes on high-technology products and grain. Grainbelt support for the wheat embargo was lower than the national level of support. However, Iowa farmers apparently turned around from majority disapproval in early January, 1980, to plurality support later that month. (See memos of January 16 and January 31, 1980, at Tab 10.)

At the same time, the "dual approach" previously discussed prevailed in some areas of potential U.S.-Soviet exchange: A majority of the public continued to favor the idea of "joint efforts with the Soviet Union to solve energy problems" and continued to oppose "prohibiting the exchange of scientists between the U.S. and the Soviet Union." (See memo of July 11, 1980, at Tab 8.)

One sanction for which substantial public support was evident from the beginning was the Olympic boycott, which continued to be favored by 60-plus percent of the public up until the holding of the games. Nor did the public have any second thoughts about the boycott. Afterward, 67 percent told the NBC poll they approved of the boycott in retrospect, even as 55 percent of those interviewed in the same poll said they thought the boycott had been an ineffective form of protest. (See memos of March 21 and September 9, 1980, at Tab 11).

Attitudes Toward "Playing the China Card"

Public sentiment favoring China over the USSR emerged clearly after "normalization." Nevertheless, Americans are inclined to favor caution in improving U.S. ties with China for two reasons: 1) doubts as to whether China's present friendliness will last and 2) the preference for not exacerbating U.S.-Soviet relations.

Even in the wake of the Afghanistan invasion, the public showed its reluctance to see the "China card" played in its responses to this Roper poll question, asked last April:

"One of the ways that has been proposed for the U.S. to respond to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan is for this country to strengthen its ties with Mainland China. But there are a lot of uncertainties about such a course. In light of what you know about Mainland China, Russia, and the current international situation, which one of these statements [respondent shown card] comes closest to your ideas of what U.S.-Mainland China relations should be?"

"We should strengthen our ties to Mainland China even if this hurts our relationship with Russia.	20%
"We should strengthen our ties to Mainland China but not in ways that hurt our relations with Russia, because Russia is more important than China in world affairs.	21
"We should move slowly to strengthen our ties to Mainland China because we really don't know what could happen in the future--the Chinese might become unfriendly to us again.	40
"We should not move to strengthen our ties to Mainland China--it's not in our country's best interest for any reason."	6
Don't know.	13

(See memo of July 24, 1980, at Tab 12.)

Attitudes Toward Soviet Dissidents

The most recent data on Soviet dissidents were gathered in a Gallup poll taken in July, 1978, shortly after Ginzburg and Shcharansky were put on trial. A surprisingly large percentage told Gallup interviewers they were aware of the trial (77 percent). A clash of two values appears to have affected the attitudes of the general public: on the one hand, support for human rights; on the other, the preference for not mixing into the internal concerns of other countries.

These two values were juxtaposed in a Gallup question that asked: "Do you think the President and the other United States leaders should criticize the Soviet Union for violating the human rights of its citizens or do you feel that it is none of our business to criticize the Soviets for their treatment of Russian citizens?"

Should criticize	43%
None of our business	49
No opinion	8

Not only did the general public display divided feelings regarding whether it was appropriate to put pressure on the Soviet Union in order to improve the situation of Russian citizens, it also was fairly pessimistic whether such pressure would be effective. Fifty-four percent told Gallup interviewers U.S. pressure would not be helpful, while 38 percent thought it would "make a difference."

Probably the most significant effect of the trials on the general public was to intensify negative perceptions of the Soviet Union. At the time, we wrote:

> We expect that the ethnic identity of Ginzburg and Shcharansky, and the activities for which they were tried, produced a sizable impact on Jewish members of the public. We also expect that the right to dissent is a more central issue to the well-educated than to the public as a whole. The trials' greatest effect on the general public may have been to heighten suspicion of the Soviet Union's intentions in other spheres. If the Soviet Union openly violates a human rights treaty, popular thinking may go, can it be "trusted" not to violate a SALT accord?

(See memo of July 17, 1978, at Tab 13.)

Attitudes Towards Arms Control and SALT

Between the spring and fall of 1979, a plurality in favor of SALT changed to a plurality opposed to SALT. The most immediate influences were presumably the opposition expressed during the Senate hearings and the announced presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba. Roper polls trace the shift between April and September (the question wording was revised in July to reflect the fact that the treaty had been signed):

"In June, President Carter for the U.S. and President Brezhnev for Russia signed a new SALT treaty. The treaty, which would last until 1985, limits each country to a maximum of 2,250 long-range nuclear missiles and bombers. As you know, there's a good deal of controversy abvout this proposed treaty. Do you think the U.S. Senate should vote for this new SALT treaty or against it?

	September 1979	July 1979	April-May 1979
For	30%	31%	33%
Against	39	29	24
Mixed feelings (volunteered response)	15	21	20
No opinion	17	19	23

(See memo of October 15, 1979, at Tab 14.)

Roper repeated the same question last January and, most recently, in October:

	October 1980	January 1980
For	26%	22%
Against	36	42
Mixed feelings	20	17
No opinion	19	18

Indubitably, SALT II is currently opposed by at least a plurality of the American public. However, the difficulty of pinning down the size, firmness, and basis of this opposition is illustrated by the differing, and somewhat contradictory, responses to questions posed in a Harris poll conducted early in November:

"In general, do you agree or disagree with President-elect Reagan that the SALT II treaty, which was not ratified by the U.S. Senate, should be scrapped and negotiations should be started again for a new nuclear arms agreement with the Russians?"

Agree	64%
Disagree	28
Not sure	8

How many of the "disagree" responses opposed scrapping the treaty (i.e., were pro-SALT) and how many were opposed to initiating new negotiations (i.e., were anti-arms control)? Conversely, how many of the "agree" responses simply favored scrapping the treaty and saw renewed negotiations as merely a political exercise? These questions are not academic, given the responses to the following Harris question in the same poll:

"All in all, do you favor or oppose President-elect Reagan sitting down with the Russians to try to come to an agreement on controlling nuclear arms?"

Favor	90%
Oppose	9
No opinion	1

(Newly released data; see Harris press release for November 25, 1980, at Tab 15.)

Seemingly, the idea of a treaty controlling strategic nuclear arms is favored by an overwhelming majority of Americans. It is the specific treaty that so many view dubiously.

Pollsters, the press reporting their findings, and policy-makers have been repeatedly misled in recent years by the failure to distinguish between public attitudes toward a concept and toward an actuality. For past examples of this confusion--which is likely to manifest itself again if new negotiations are begun--we have appended two memoranda: 1) "Roper vs NBC: Two SALT Polls are Poles Apart" (December 19, 1978); 2) "SALT Polls are Poles Apart--Again" (February 21, 1979). (See Tab 16.)

The reasons that Americans favor nuclear arms control but are wary of a SALT treaty can be summed up in a simple statement: A SALT treaty has to be signed with the Soviet Union. As was pointed out in earlier sections of this overview, the American public fervently dislikes and deeply distrusts the necessary co-signer to a treaty controlling strategic nuclear weapons.

It is no accident, therefore, that increased concern regarding relative U.S.-Soviet nuclear capability has been accompanied by declining support for SALT. Nor is it a coincidence that those Americans who are dubious about American negotiators' ability to cope with presumed Soviet duplicity are likely to oppose SALT. The correlation of these attitudes was set forth in detail in the March 9, 1979, memorandum, "Concern for National Security Erodes Support for SALT." (See Tab 17.)

The doubts and fears about Soviet duplicity and duped American officials that have been expressed in opposition to SALT II are not new sentiments. They were being expressed in polls conducted in 1975 and 1976, with regard to detente and SALT I. In mid-1975, a

Roper poll found that many more Americans believed detente had been more advantageous to the Soviet Union than to the U.S. (by 31 percent to 3 percent). The remaining two-thirds of the public divided fairly evenly between those with no opinion and those believing detente had benefitted both sides equally. Since the latter group probably contained a substantial proportion of respondents without an actual opinion, the most significant figure is the 10-1 ratio of negative views to positive views.

Not many months later, however, Harris polls asked a question that produced responses reminiscent of the recent Harris finding on the public's continued proclivity for "negotiation": "Do you favor or oppose further detente between the U.S. and Russia--that is, closer cooperation and more agreement between the two countries?"

	March 1976	December 1975
Favor	59%	62%
Oppose	23	15
No opinion	18	23

(See memorandum of May 18, 1976, at Tab 18.)

When polled, the American public tends to give high levels of approval to "negotiation" in the abstract. When the negotiation is with the Soviet Union and the abstraction has become an actuality in the form of an accord, the public's skepticism regarding the Soviet Union comes to the fore. What the polls have not revealed is the kind of SALT treaty that would achieve majority support.

Drafted:PA/OAP:BRoshco:mdr
12/3/80 20474